

Meaningful Silences: Possibilities of a New Theoretical and Methodological Agenda

A joint BSA Social Theory Study Group and Childhood Study Group Event

11 February 2025 (15:00-16:30 GMT)

Online

About the Event

This joint meeting of the BSA Social Theory group and the BSA Childhood Study group will feature Xiaorong Gu and Doris Bühler-Niederberger discussing their research on conceptualizing silence. Based on a co-authored working paper, the speakers will re-centre silence as the episteme of listening to, unpacking and understanding the vulnerable in society. They make this intervention from a childhood sociology perspective, a subdiscipline that takes a strong normative position towards adopting a voice paradigm, which in the late 20th century rightfully critiqued earlier paradigms in childhood and child development studies that had rendered children as voiceless and hapless victims of adult powers and indoctrination, and which unfortunately has gone to the other extreme towards a dogmatic search for the agentic and voiceful child even in extremely vulnerable conditions. This latter trend could risk trivializing the powerful social forces that silence, mute or even strip away children's voices for control, for protection and sometimes for pure exploitation. It is thus high time that we critically interrogate the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions undergirding the voice paradigm and move towards recentring silence as the episteme of the weak, grounded in critical realism in understanding children's social life. The speakers will also outline a typology that summarizes different types of silences (of varying volumes and pitches) as spoken or expressed by children, informed by empirical studies by diverse childhood scholars. This event explores questions related to social theory, childhood epistemologies, political economy and children's everyday life.

Speaker Bios

- **Xiaorong Gu** Dr. phil., is Lecturer in Childhood Studies at University of Suffolk. Featured as Sociologist of the Month in April, 2023 by Current Sociology, she researches children's and youth's migration/mobilities, intergenerational relationships, transitioning to adulthood and their positioning vis-à-vis family, school and the nation-state, with a focus on China and Asian societies at large. She guest-edited two special issues, with Child Indicators Research (2021) and Current Sociology (2022) each, on the shifting valuation of children in contemporary Asian societies and the Global South at large. She also co-edited The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies (2023, with Doris Bühler-Niederberger, Jessica Schwittek, and Elena Kim). Currently, she is developing two new projects with collaborators: Parenting Special Needs Children in China, which focuses on how families stretch themselves to raise autistic children in a context of limited public welfare and

social support; and Beyond the 'Model Minority' Myth: Perspectives of Ethnic Chinese in the United Kingdom, which explores the experiences of growing up as ethnic Chinese in contemporary British society.

- **Doris Bühler-Niederberger** Dr. phil., is a sociologist and Professor emerita at University of Wuppertal. She researches childhood, youth and transition to adulthood in different countries. She is particularly interested in age as a social structural dimension, the definition of age categories, and intergenerational relations in public and private contexts. Among her recent publications: Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies, 2023 (ed. with X. Gu, Jessica Schwittek, Elena Kim); [Vulnerable agents: what we can learn from a child-centred perspective on transnational families. Families, Relationships and Societies, 2025 \(22\)](#); Being Nice: the modus vivendi in primary school classrooms. Symbolic Interaction, 2025 (to appear); When the family occupies the future – Self-processes and well-being of Kyrgyz children and young people. Child Indicators Research, 2022, 15(4), 1179-1208 (with Jessica Schwittek); Victim, perpetrator, or what else – generational and gender perspectives on children, youth, and violence. Sociological Studies of Children and Youth (SSCY), Volume 25, 2020 (edited with Lars Albert); [Struggling for open awareness – trajectories of violence against children. Children and Youth Services Review, 2022](#) (with Lars Albert).

Registration

This event is free to attend but registration is required.